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Learning to Listen

Shane Safir

Listening helps us slow down, understand deeper currents, and clarify core values.

Staci Ross-Morrison and Josue Diaz are co-principals of Oakland Technical High School, a large, comprehensive school in Oakland, California. Tech, as it's called, has long enjoyed a reputation as the district's flagship school—a place that's sought by families of all backgrounds and that reflects the diversity of the Bay Area. More than half of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

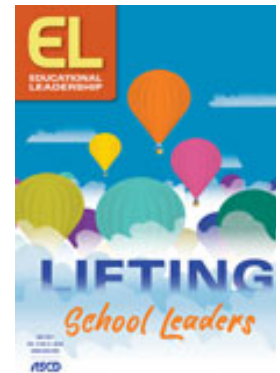
I became familiar with Ross-Morrison and Diaz's work at Tech when I facilitated a district leadership retreat in January 2016 and later became their coach. I learned that when Diaz arrived at Tech as a teacher eight years ago, he found a hidden story simmering beneath the school's shiny surface. He was assigned to teach conceptual physics to 9th graders. During his first-period class on his first day (his students' first day of high school), he said to them, "Yo, give me the low-down on this school." What the kids said astounded him: "You're teaching the dummy class."

Diaz asked the students to explain what they meant. "They broke it down for me—how kids are separated into different tracks when they enter and how they understood exactly where they fit in the hierarchy," he said. On day one, Diaz learned that there were two Oakland Techs.

A School's Vision

That was 2009. In 2016, after a stint as an assistant principal, Diaz transitioned to the role of co-principal alongside veteran leader Ross-Morrison. The two joined forces in a campaign to transform the status quo and redefine success for students and staff. Driven by a moral imperative to create equitable opportunities for every student, they put forward a bold vision: to significantly reduce the school's racial equity gap in college readiness as well as its English language learner dropout rate by June 2019.

Ross-Morrison and Diaz are moving Tech toward this vision slowly and steadily. Early signs of progress include a maturing instructional leadership team and a recent bubbling up of debate among staff and parents about how to redistribute opportunity—in this case, coveted academic programs and advanced curriculum—more equitably across the school. How are these two leaders navigating this complex change process? Simply put: They're listening.



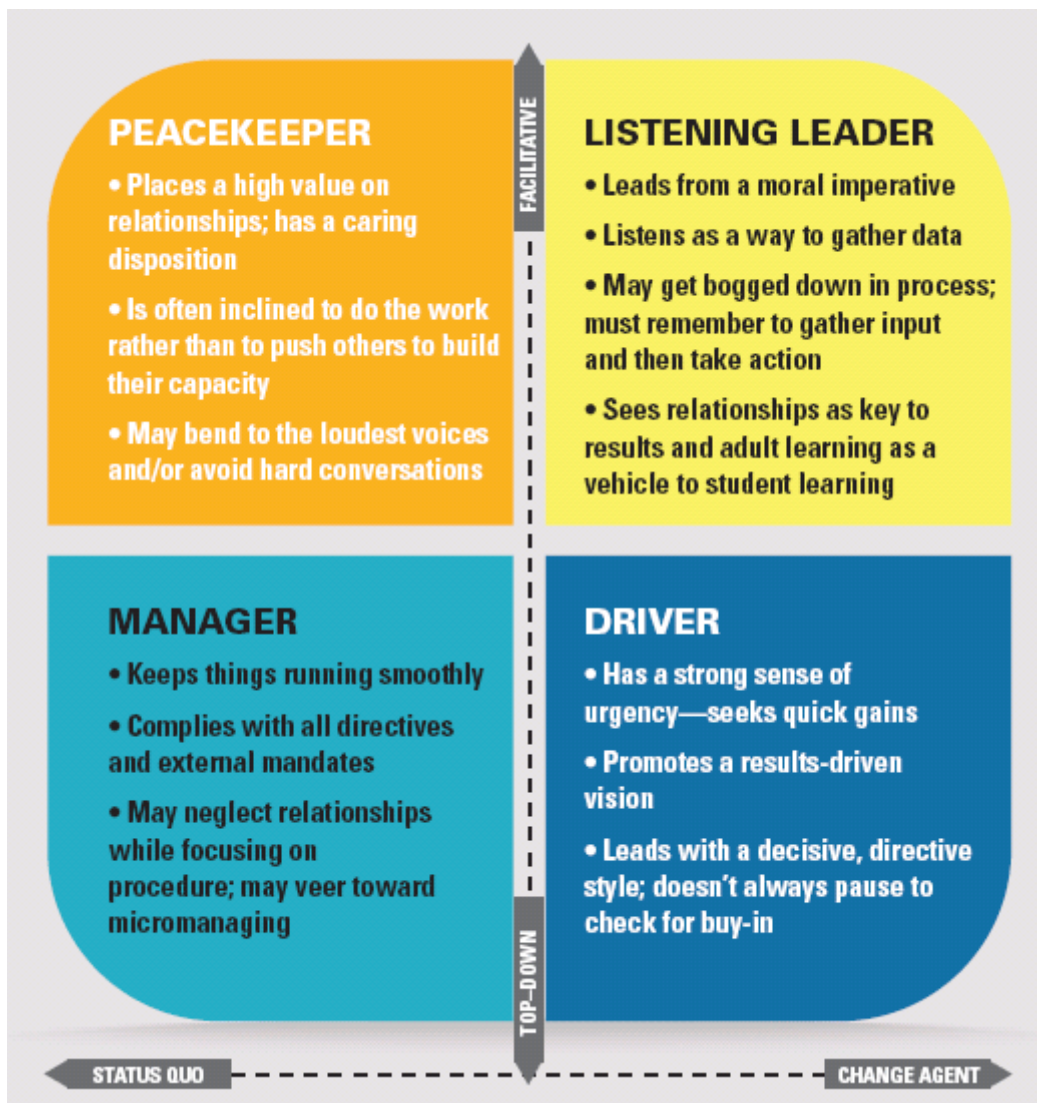
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Listening is at the heart of school transformation. It's the one skill that allows leaders to connect across racial, cultural, gender, and socioeconomic differences; to gather rich data on the front lines of change; to build staff capacity through reflective questions; and to drive reform through the power of relationships. This simple shift in approach—from telling to asking, from expert to learning leader, from hero to host of meaningful dialogue—can help leaders close the gap between their vision and their day-to-day actions.

Five Whys for Listening

The test-and-punish era made it difficult for leaders to listen to their school communities. As parent, student, and teacher voices receded amid a flurry of interventions and initiatives, a few leadership paradigms became popular (see Figure 1). Although the *peacekeeper*, *manager*, and *driver* approaches each have merits, I want to offer *listening leadership* as a powerful alternative that draws on the respective strengths of the other three. Think of the matrix as a Twister board. As a leader, you want to have a limb (or at least a finger!) in each quadrant, but be firmly anchored in the listening leader quadrant.

Figure 1. Leadership Archetypes



Source: *The Listening Leader* by Shane Safir. Copyright © 2017 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

The listening leader understands that school transformation is a long game: There are no quick fixes, turnaround or shortcuts. He or she leverages listening to grow a collaborative culture and build the capacity of teachers and staff. Rather than declare a vision, the listening leader constructs one through a dynamic process in which dissenting perspectives are welcome. He or she also views student, staff, and parent voices as vital sources of data.

Here, I offer five reasons why you should adopt the listening leadership model to bring about change in your school, team, or system.

1. Listening helps us tune in to dominant narratives and shift them.

Listening leaders are perceptive; they tune in to how people *think* and *talk* about the work of school improvement. They model a shift from Discourse I (language that serves to maintain the status quo and reproduce inequity) to Discourse II (language that explicitly names uncomfortable, unequal, and prejudicial conditions and relationships in schools) (Eubanks, Parish, & Smith, 1997). See Figure 2 for the attributes of these two discourses. Listening leaders model this shift by facilitating brave conversations, asking hard questions, digging into the root causes of inequity, and ensuring that students, families, and colleagues from historically marginalized communities feel empowered to share their ideas and experiences.

Figure 2. A Language Shift that Leads to Equity

Discourse I	Discourse II
Language typically used to talk about, question, and design the work of school improvement. Discourse I maintains the status quo while appearing to respond to demands for change.	Language that names uncomfortable, unequal, ineffective, and prejudicial conditions and relationships in schools. Discourse II explores the root causes of inequity and models an inquiry approach to improvement.
Attributes: Singular truths Answers and technical fixes Symptoms Improving what exists Externalization or "looking out the window" Limited time and ability Reproduction of inequity	Attributes: Multiple stories Inquiry, adaptive challenges, and root causes Changing something significant Internal reflection or "looking in the mirror" Getting started anyway Transformation
Source: Adapted with permission from "The Nature of Discourse in Education" by the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools, now the National Equity Project, 2004.	

At Tech, Ross-Morrison and Diaz listened carefully to the interwoven narratives in their school and found a story that elevated the status of programs perceived as more rigorous and desirable—programs serving a disproportionately white, middle class demographic. They also uncovered an overflow of students of color who were interested in, but couldn't access, these programs. The co-principals set their sights on dismantling the old

narrative, "that only 'certain kids' can handle advanced coursework," as Diaz said. They began to explore win-win options that would increase access for all students.

They worked closely with 9th grade teachers to develop an outreach plan for recruiting underrepresented students into rigorous programs. They redesigned the application process to reduce barriers to access and began to spread word about their core values widely and unambiguously: namely, every program should reflect the diversity of the student body. In one year, the co-principals reached their goal of having more than 90 percent of 9th graders engage in the application process for advanced programs.

2. Listening helps us keep our finger on the pulse of complex change.

The process of transforming a school is complex, nonlinear, and unpredictable. Our best-laid plans can be derailed by new district initiatives, teacher turnover, or conflict among staff. During a time of change, listening leaders gather input from a broad range of stakeholders before articulating a clear and focused change imperative, and they continue to engage people along the way. They employ specific listening strategies to help their colleagues let go of unhelpful mindsets and embrace new ones.

Ross-Morrison and Diaz use formal and informal listening routines to stay abreast of conditions on the ground. They regularly spend time in classrooms and check in informally with teachers. Last fall, they initiated a formal listening campaign with staff leaders with a focus on mending relationships, discussing current realities, and exploring possible next steps. In confidential 30-minute sessions, the co-principals asked questions to gather insight from staff members. They posed questions such as, What's working well here? What's not working well? What changes do you think would make the biggest difference? What do you need to hear or experience to heal from what's been difficult? What's a hope you have for our community moving forward?

This process reminded staff members that they play a crucial role in shaping change at Tech. In Diaz's words, strategies like these "act like bumper guards when you are boating to keep you on course. Without those, there's no way to know if we're doing the right thing and moving in the right direction."

3. Listening helps leaders stay true to their values in the face of pressure.

A study from University of California, Berkeley, found that schools with high levels of integrity manage external pressures by holding fast to their values (Mintrop, 2012). The researchers concluded that integrity comes directly from a school's leader and the culture he or she builds. A high-integrity faculty culture is characterized by open communication, tolerance of dissent, and a learning orientation—values that listening leaders model in their interactions.

I asked Ross-Morrison how she maintains integrity in the face of pressure. "I have certain values that I hold true about education for all kids," she said. "As long as I constantly reflect and ask myself the hard questions, I maintain clarity." Reflection takes many forms for Ross-Morrison, including meditation and journaling. The two leaders also set aside time at their weekly meetings for an "empty the cup" ritual. Each leader enjoys several uninterrupted minutes to share whatever is on his or her mind while the other leader practices listening with care, focused attention, and a lack of judgment.

In Ross-Morrison's mind, listening serves a dual purpose with respect to the change process. On one hand, it helps her uncover common values among teachers, administrators, and families because "most people want the best for the kids." On the other hand, it gives her a bird's eye view of why some teachers and some parents hold different values, and what it will take to reconcile those differences. For instance, a recent series of community meetings revealed just how fragmented the parent community is at Tech. Noticing the overrepresentation of white, middle class parents and the underrepresentation of black and Latino families, Ross-Morrison and Diaz decided to hold future meetings at locations across the city.

4. Listening helps leaders model humanity and compassion in the face of trauma.

Listening also sharpens emotional intelligence—the ability to detect others' emotions, understand your own, and use this information to guide interactions (Goleman, 2012). In one study of 464 principals and vice principals, researchers found that the most effective leaders showed skill in the areas of empathy and relationship building (Stone, Parker, & Wood, 2005).

Developing emotional intelligence is crucial in schools affected by trauma, including those that have experienced an accident, incidents of violence, or even relentless poverty. Ross-Morrison said her students have experienced such events: "We can't ignore it. Young people have to learn how to deal with trauma to move forward in their lives."

For educators to intervene effectively in student trauma, they must be emotionally healthy themselves. This is especially challenging when many teachers are dealing with secondary trauma and need a space to talk about their experiences and learn how to teach young people to cope.

At Tech, Ross-Morrison strives to listen with emotional intelligence in her daily interactions. This requires what I call *deep listening*, or listening without an agenda in a way that fosters relational trust. The three pillars of deep listening are paying attention to nonverbal cues as indicators of emotion, expressing empathy in mature and caring ways, and modeling affirmation (verbal and nonverbal moves signaling that you value the other person).

She and Diaz also think systemically about how to mitigate the effects of trauma. This year, the staff is learning about trauma-informed practices that can be adapted in the classroom. During staff meetings, Ross-Morrison invites teachers to share and process their emotions in listening structures such as dyads.¹ When traumatic incidents occur on campus, she arranges for restorative practices like harm circles that allow students or adults to address the incident and repair the harm.

5. Listening helps us reimagine data and bring student voice into the equation.

Finally, listening helps us address the overreliance on data that is far removed from the day-to-day life of the school. Listening leaders recognize that much of the data we need is right before us if we choose to listen—speaking to us in lunchrooms, appearing through e-mails received in the evening, showing up in our offices every day. We can find data in our close observations of students working on tasks and of teachers engaged in collaboration. These types of data can tell the story of transformation, as well as indicate where support is needed.

For Ross-Morrison and Diaz, student, parent, and teacher voice are crucial components of the change process. Before proposing a way to redesign the school's master schedule, they spent a year and a half listening to stakeholders through surveys, focus groups, and a formal redesign team. This past fall, they also used the listening campaign to gauge whether teachers had the interest and capacity to design a new academic program around student interests. From that data, the co-principals recommended the development of an International Studies/Race, Policy, and Law pathway that they believe will be high-interest, high-rigor, and timely.

In addition to fostering a more collaborative culture, listening helps leaders gather data to use when there's pushback to change. "Listening is armor and back-up support all at the same time," Diaz suggests. "Any time there's change involved, parents ask, 'Is this your idea?' I am able to say with authenticity, 'No, it's not *my* idea. This is what all these stakeholders have been asking for.'"

Listening Ahead

Listening leadership is beginning to transform the culture at Tech. Diaz recently created a communications plan to explicitly address communication gaps between and among administrators, staff, and parents. When he and Ross-Morrison decided to make listening a top priority, the staff's relief was palpable. People began generating ideas and offering support on all fronts, joining the schoolwide commitment to increasing equity, access, and deep learning for staff and students.

As education leaders, we can't predict the future. With the recent transition to a new presidency and an expected new policy framework for public education, the path forward seems foggy than ever. What we *can* do is listen and develop a shared, local, equity-driven agenda. We can stay firmly rooted in our own values and in the voices, hopes, and experiences of our constituents. By leading with humility and authentic questions, we will build a powerful foundation for change from the ground up—conversation by conversation.

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Endnote

¹ For information about the dyad listening protocol, visit <http://schoolreforminitiative.org/doc/dyad.pdf>.

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